

DEVICE FOR THE OPTOELECTRONIC DETECTION OF SWITCHING POSITIONS OF A SWITCHING ELEMENT

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

5 This is a continuation of International Application PCT/EP02/09485,
published in German, with an international filing date of August 24, 2002, which
claims priority to DE 101 41 975.9 filed on August 28, 2001.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

10 The present invention relates to an apparatus for the optoelectronic
detection of switching positions of a mechanically actuatable switching element, and
relates in particular to such an apparatus having individual photoelectric receivers,
a light source arranged to expose the receivers, and a shutter which is movable
relative to the light source and the receivers and is coupled to the movement of the
switching element.

15 2. Background Art

Apparatuses for detecting switching positions are used in switches
which are assigned multiple functions in order to allow a user to recognize the
switching positions of the multifunction switch. Such switches are used as lighting
and steering column switches in motor vehicles. These types of switches are
20 configured to be movable in multiple planes to allow the functions to be executed
independently of one another and in parallel to one another. Backlit symbols are
assigned to the switch in order to represent the respective switching positions. The
symbols light as a function of the respective switch position to indicate the switch
position.

These types of switches are conventionally configured as contact switches so that a switch position is attained if the corresponding electrical connection is produced by the switching organ. Even if different functions can be switched with such a multifunctional switch, the cost increases inordinately in case
5 of complicated switch structures if the respective switch positions are to be detected in the above-described visual manner. Moreover, the elements provided for mechanical contact-making are subject to the effects of wear and aging.

In addition to the switch position determination being displayed to a user, the respective switching position should also be made accessible as a data input
10 to a data processing system such as an onboard computer in motor vehicles for monitor and control purposes.

Multifunctional switches can be configured as contactless optoelectronic-functioning switches, as is known from DE 43 32 748 A1. The switch described in this document is characterized in that no electrical contact-
15 making is brought about in order to detect a switching position. Instead, a photosensitive element acting as a receiver is exposed to light if the switching element is in a certain switching position.

An optical switch of this sort includes, besides the photosensitive element, a light source which can be arranged on the same board as the
20 photosensitive element. By means of a fiber-optical member whose area on the light output side is arranged facing the photosensitive surface of the photoelectric element, the required light is brought to the photoelectric element. A movement gap is between the output side of the fiber-optical member and the photoelectric element. A shutter is movable in the movement gap and is coupled to the movement of the
25 switching element to move therewith. The shutter has an opening at a specified position. After a movement of the switching element to a certain switching position, the opening becomes aligned with the area on the output side of the fiber-optical member and the photosensitive surface of the photoelectric element so that the photoelectric element can be exposed to the light.

If the switching element is removed from this position, the shutter shades the photoelectric element from the light and the switching position is exited. In the subject matter of this document, each switching position is thus realized through its own optoelectronic switch. Through suitable arrangement of several such optical switches complicated switching operations can be detected. However, under conditions where installation space is limited, it is not possible to realize complicated switching operations in the described manner.

DE 298 17 668 U1 discloses another switching position detection apparatus which is configured to function in an optoelectronic manner. In the subject matter of this document, a light source is coupled to the movement of the switching element and is thus tracked along with any movement the switching element makes. The light source acts upon a two-dimensional sensor array formed from a plurality of individual converter elements, e.g., a camera sensor. Switching position detection occurs as a function of which converter elements of the sensor array are exposed to light as a function of the position of the switching element. However, this known switching position detection apparatus requires a microprocessor for its evaluation and is thus more expensive than the previously described switching position detection apparatus.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Starting out from the described background art, the underlying object of the present invention is to provide a switching position detection apparatus that can be implemented using simple means while avoiding the disadvantages of the described background art.

This object is solved according to the present invention in that at least two receivers are arranged in each case at a distance correspondingly from each other of at least one switching step in the switching direction of the switching element and that the shutter has a shading region through which in each case of a switching position of the switching element the state of only a single receiver

changes when the switching position of the switching element changes to an adjacent switching position.

Moreover, the present invention is characterized by an apparatus for the optoelectronic detection of switching positions of a mechanically actuatable switching element. The apparatus includes a photoelectric receiver, a plurality of light sources arranged to expose the receiver, and a shutter. The light sources and the receiver are movable relative to the shutter and are coupled to the movement of the switching element. The light sources include at least two light sources which are arranged in each case at a distance correspondingly from each other of at least one switching step in the switching direction of the switching element. The shutter has a shading region through which in each case of a switching position of the switching element the state of only a single light source changes its state in terms of an exposure of the receiver when the switching position of the switching element changes to an adjacent switching position.

The switching position detection apparatus according to a first embodiment of the present invention, unlike the known background art, uses a receiver arrangement formed from at least two receivers and a shutter having a shading region. The shading region of the shutter is configured such that in response to each change in the switching position of the switching element only one receiver changes its state. For example, the shading region can be designed such that all of the receivers are simultaneously shaded.

Four switching steps can be detected when using two receivers in a configuration of this sort. At least two receivers are arranged in each case at a distance correspondingly from each other of at least one switching step in the switching direction of the switching element. As the shutter has a shading region with which possibly both receivers can be simultaneously shaded, a switching position is defined in this manner. It is also possible to shade only one receiver, shade only the other receiver, and shade neither receiver with the three other switching positions in a configuration of this sort being defined in this manner.

If four switching steps are provided and if a partial shading of individual receivers is not provided, then only two receivers are required. As such, the number of receivers is reduced by 50% compared to the number of receivers required in the known background art. If partial shading of individual receivers is provided, then the number of required receivers can be further reduced compared to the known background art.

In the present invention, erroneous interpretations are avoided as only a single receiver changes its state in response to a change in the switching position of the switching element to an adjacent switching position. This state change can be caused through exposure of a previously unexposed receiver or vice versa, or also by changing the exposure intensity, e.g., through regional or partial shading of a receiver by the shutter.

The switching position detection apparatus in accordance with a second embodiment of the present invention is similarly configured with the roles of the light source and the receivers being swapped. In the second embodiment, at least two light sources are provided with a single receiver. The light emitted by the light sources is encoded, e.g., pulsed over time. A switching position of the switching element can be detected based on a corresponding evaluation of the received signal. A light encoding can take place, for example, also via a wavelength with different light sources emitting light with different wavelengths.

The switching position detection apparatus according to the present invention is also suitable for carrying out a switching position detection if the switching element is movable in two or more directions. In each direction of movement of the switching element, a receiver arrangement including at least two receivers and the shutter with its shading region is conceived (as described above). Due to the decrease in hardware compared with the known background art, even complicated switching operations can be detected in an optoelectronic manner with a switching position detection apparatus of this sort without the need for a larger installation space.

The use of a microprocessor to use the switching position detection apparatus of the present invention is not necessary as the evaluation can take place via a digital circuit in which the output signal of the switching position detection apparatus feeds into for processing. For example, a digital circuit of this sort can be a binary decoder.

The use of an infrared (IR) light source is preferred for operating the switching position detection apparatus in accordance with the present invention. In a configuration of this sort, in each case a filter which passes IR light is connected upstream of the receivers being used so that the switching position detection apparatus does not need to be encapsulated with respect to otherwise disruptive daylight.

For the case in which a microprocessor is available in the surroundings of the switching position detection apparatus, such as in a motor vehicle, instead of using discrete photoelectric receivers, a sensor array formed from a plurality of individual photoelectric receivers, e.g., a row or camera sensor can be used.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The present invention is described hereafter based on exemplary embodiments with reference to the attached figures. The figures are as follows:

FIGS. 1a, 1b, 1c, and 1d illustrate schematic representations of an optoelectronic switching position detection apparatus in accordance with a first embodiment of the present invention with which four switching positions can be implemented in a switching direction of the switching element; and

FIG. 2 illustrates a schematic representation of an optoelectronic switching position detection apparatus in accordance with a second embodiment of the present invention whose switching element is movable in two directions.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT(S)

FIG. 1a illustrates a schematic representation of a switching position detection apparatus 1 in accordance with a first embodiment of the present invention. Apparatus 1 includes a shutter 2 which is movably connected to a switching element (not shown) to move with the movement of the switching element. Shutter 2 forms a shading region in its full width. Shutter 2 is coupled to the movement of the switching element and is displaceable in the plane indicated by the double arrow. The representation of the movement of shutter 2 in a plane is a simplified representation. The switching element may be coupled so as to be swivelable about a rotational axis such that shutter 2 moves on an orbit in response to movement of the switching element.

A light source 3 is arranged on one side of shutter 2. Light source 3 is fixed in place in a stationary manner with respect to shutter 2. Light source 3 includes light emitting diodes (LED) which emit IR light in the shown exemplary embodiment. A receiver arrangement 4 is arranged on the opposite side of shutter 2. Receiver arrangement 4 is also fixed in place in a stationary manner with respect to shutter 2. Receiver arrangement 4 includes two discrete photoelectric receivers 5, 6. Light source 3 and light receivers 5, 6 are arranged in an expedient manner on a common board. Light receivers 5, 6 are IR-sensitive. In order to suppress daylight reflections, a filter which passes only IR light is connected upstream of light receivers 5, 6. Light receivers 5, 6 are connected to an evaluation circuit 7.

With switching position detection apparatus 1, four switching positions of the switching element can be implemented. FIG. 1a shows the first switching position in which both light receivers 5, 6 are exposed to light from light source 3. As such, the first switching position is characterized by an output signal indicating exposure of both light receivers 5, 6 to light source 3. FIG. 1b illustrates the second switching position of the switching element in which light receiver 5 is exposed to light from light source 3 while light receiver 6 is shaded from the light source by a front part 8 of shutter 2. As such, the second switching position is

characterized by an output signal indicating a sole exposure of light receiver 5 to light source 3.

FIG. 1c illustrates the third switching position of the switching element in which both light receivers 5, 6 are shaded with respect to the light emitted by light source 3. In the third switching position, front region 8 of shutter 2 shades light receiver 5 and a rear region 9 of the shutter shades light receiver 6. As such, the third switching position is characterized by an output signal indicating no exposure of either light receiver 5, 6 to light source 3. FIG. 1d illustrates the fourth switching position of the switching element in which rear region 9 of shutter 2 shades light receiver 5 from light source 3 while light receiver 6 is exposed to light source 3. As such, the fourth switching position is characterized by an output signal indicating a sole exposure of light receiver 6 to light from light source 3.

In the switching position sequence as shown, it is recognizable that a position change leads only to the change of the state of a single light receiver 5 or 6. In this manner, erroneous interpretations are prevented which could arise if two light receivers were to change their state simultaneously and not after one another.

FIG. 2 illustrates a schematized representation of a switching position detection apparatus 10 in accordance with a second embodiment of the present invention. Switching position detection apparatus 10 enables switching position detection in two directions. The switching element of switching position detection apparatus 10 is supported so as to be swivelable about two rotational axes. A shutter 11 is coupled to the movement of the switching element. Shutter 11 is built in the shown exemplary embodiment from a holder 12 which supports two shading strips 13, 14. Each shading strip 13, 14 is used for switching position detection of a light receiver arrangement in each case.

A receiver arrangement formed from receivers E_1 and E_2 is used for switching position detection of a movement of the switching element in the y direction. Another receiver arrangement formed from receivers E_3 , E_4 , and E_5 is used for detecting a switching position of the switching element in the x direction.

5 The receivers E_1 , E_2 and E_3 , E_4 , and E_5 are arranged at a distance correspondingly from each other of one switching step in each case. Shading strips 13, 14 are sectioned into boxes in order to illustrate the different switching positions of the switching element. In the y direction, four switching positions can be detected through the use of the two receivers E_1 , E_2 . In the x direction, five switching positions can be detected in this embodiment through the use of the three receivers E_3 , E_4 , and E_5 . The states of the individual receivers E_1 , E_2 , E_3 , E_4 , and E_5 in the different switching positions of switching position detection apparatus 10 are given in the following table:

10	y position	E_1	E_2	x position	E_3	E_4	E_5
		light	dark		light	light	dark
		dark	dark		light	dark	dark
		dark	light		dark	dark	dark
15	4	light	light		dark	dark	light
					dark	light	light

In order to detect six x switch positions, the described arrangement can be modified such that the shading strip 13 is six boxes wide. The "x = six" position can be determined when the receivers E_3 , E_4 , and E_5 are exposed to light from the light source.

20 Shutter 11 is laid out in a plane in FIG. 2 to simplify its representation. Preferably, shutter 11 is curved. The midpoint of the curve is located at the intersection of the two rotational axes of the switching element. In the immediate vicinity of the intersection of the rotational axes of the switching element, the light source (not shown in FIG. 2) is also arranged.

25 From the description of the present invention, it is clear that with the described switching position detection apparatuses a plurality of switching positions, e.g., of a steering column switch of a motor vehicle, can be detected even in a relatively small installation space and with only a minimum of hardware. Instead of the arrangement shown in the figures in which the shutters are movable and the

receiver(s) and the light source(s) are arranged in a stationary manner, it can also be provided to arrange the shutter in a stationary manner and arrange the other elements to be movable. In this case, a sensor array, e.g., a camera sensor, on which discrete regions of a switching position are assigned may be used instead of
5 discrete receivers.

The terms shading, shading region, and shading strip used herein includes on the one hand an arrangement as is described in the figures so that a direct shading takes place through a shading region of this sort. However, these terms can also be understood to mean a configuration in which mirrors are also used
10 for the shutter so that the light source(s) and the receiver(s) are arranged on the same side of the shutter and an exposure of a receiver takes place in a corresponding mirror position.